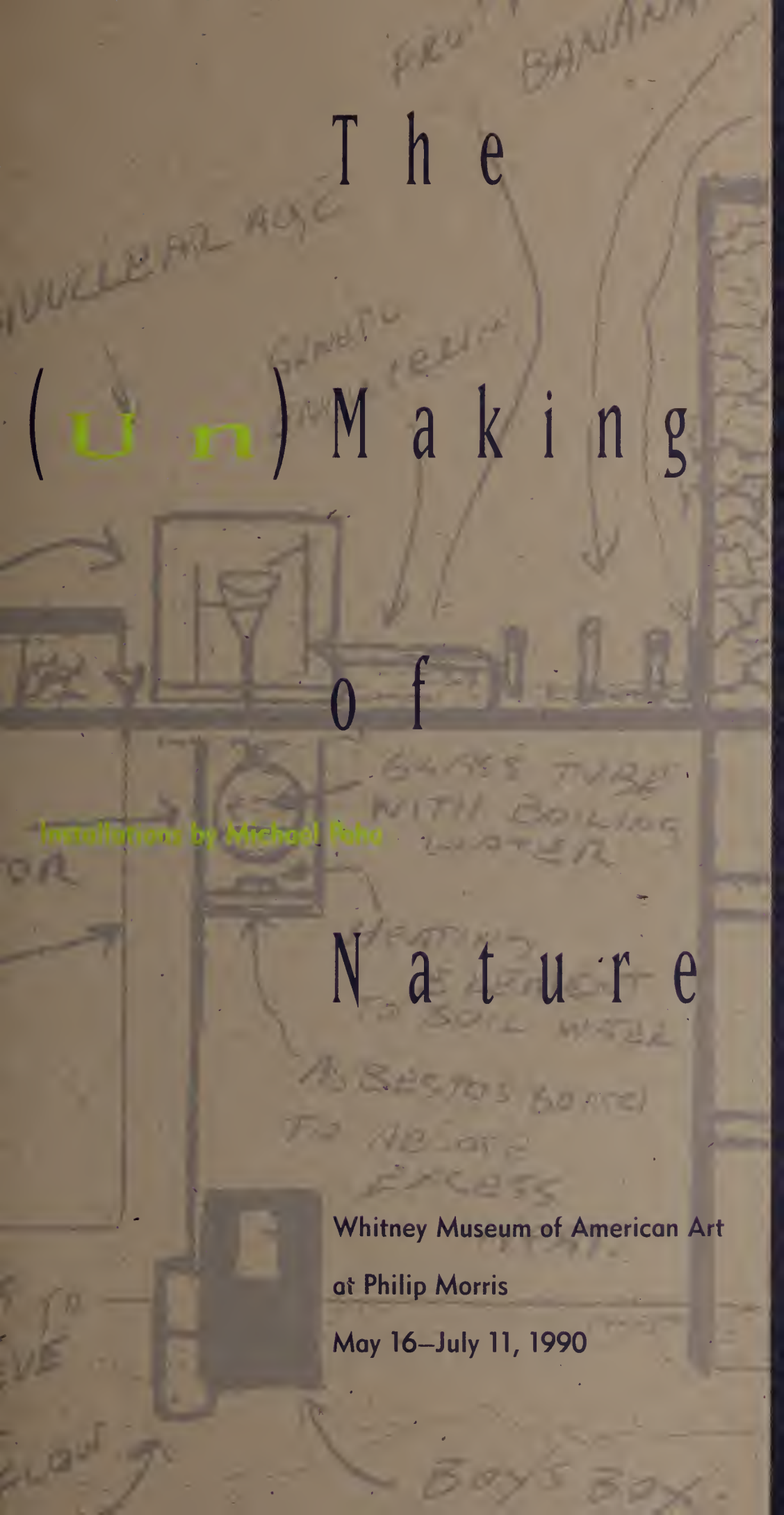

The (Un)Making of Nature

Installations by Michael Asher

Whitney Museum of American Art

at Philip Morris

May 16–July 11, 1990

Installations by Michael Paha

Timeline, 1985, reinstolled 1990
Mixed-media installotion,
dimensions variable
Collection of the artist

As We Sleep, 1988
Mixed-medio instollation,
dimensions variable
Perimeter Gallery, Chicago

This exhibition was organized by the following Heleno Rubinstein Fellows in the 1989–90 Whitney Museum Independent Study Progrom: Julio Einspruch, Elizobeth Finch, James Morcovitz, Helen Molesworth, ond Lydio Yee.

The (Un)Making of Nature
is a two-port exhibition.

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ot Philip Morris
New York, New York
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Downtown ot Federol Reserve Plaza
New York, New York
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Whitney Museum of American Art
at Philip Morris
120 Park Avenue
New York, New York 10017
(212) 878-2453
Free admission

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drawing for *Timeline* (detail), 1985

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Controlled

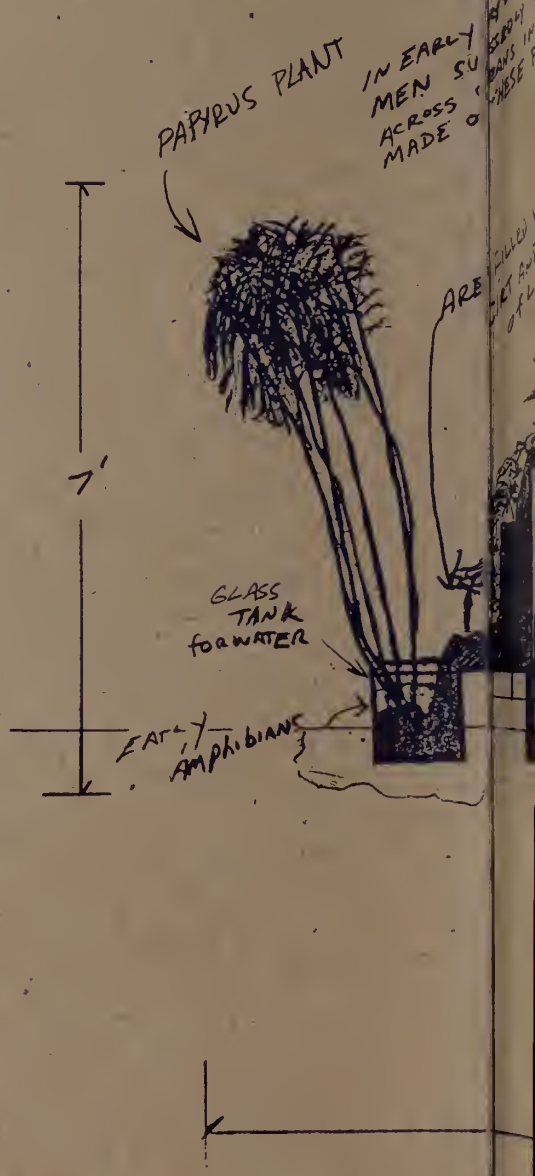
Michael Paha's installations simulate ecosystems. He calls each one an "arsarium," from the Latin *ars* (art) and *arium* (place or housing). These dynamic works are elaborate networks of terrariums, aquariums, and aviories. Within each controlled environment lies a certain unpredictability: the plant and animal life inside cannot be programmed, nor can the functions of the environment itself be entirely foreseen. This dialectic between the human desire for control and nature's resistance to such control informs all of Paha's work.

A native of Chicago, Paha (b. 1957) studied art in the early 1970s in Kansas City, Missouri, where he was introduced to the rural landscape of the region as well as to the Earthworks movement. When he returned to Chicago at the end of the seventies, he began to rethink the position of the "natural" within the context of the urban environment. More recently, his role as a preparator of displays at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago has encouraged him to create living ecosystems as vehicles for the investigation of control and fantasy in relationship to nature.

Paha's arsariums suggest the many different ways in which human and natural systems interact. Whereas his contemporaries, among them Ashley Bickerton and Clegg and Guttmann, posit a romantic union of industrial and natural elements, Paha questions the position of power over nature that technology permits us to assume. Indeed, he is interested in how technology disrupts natural processes. His work highlights various natural systems, such as the geological process of streambed erosion, which compensate for this often violent interaction.

In *Timeline* (1985, reinstalled 1990) Paha re-presents a historical narrative of the technological exploitation of nature by Western civilization. The work begins with large stalks of papyrus, which the Egyptians used for sailing vessels. As the piece continues, a miniature farmscape in the form of a rigid line of plants alludes to the modern industrialization of agriculture. The section representing the nuclear age—our contemporary investment in nuclear technology and genetic engineering—is interpreted through "low-tech" scientific equipment such as the bunsen burner, test tubes, and flasks. The work concludes, however, not in the familiar terrain of a post-apocalyptic dystopia, but rather in an affirmation of the regenerative powers of nature in the formation of the new ice age. The result of this civilization, Paha asserts, may be the end of human life but not of natural existence.

If *Timeline* explores the historical relationship between industrialization and the natural world, then *As We Sleep* (1988) explores the more mysterious and phantasmagoric aspects of this relationship. Large two-by-four wooden beams create a skeletal wall frame containing various nocturnal animal habitats. A community of finches inhabits the top expanse of the work. Underneath, several terrariums housing leeches and catfish are connected by glass tubing, allowing the

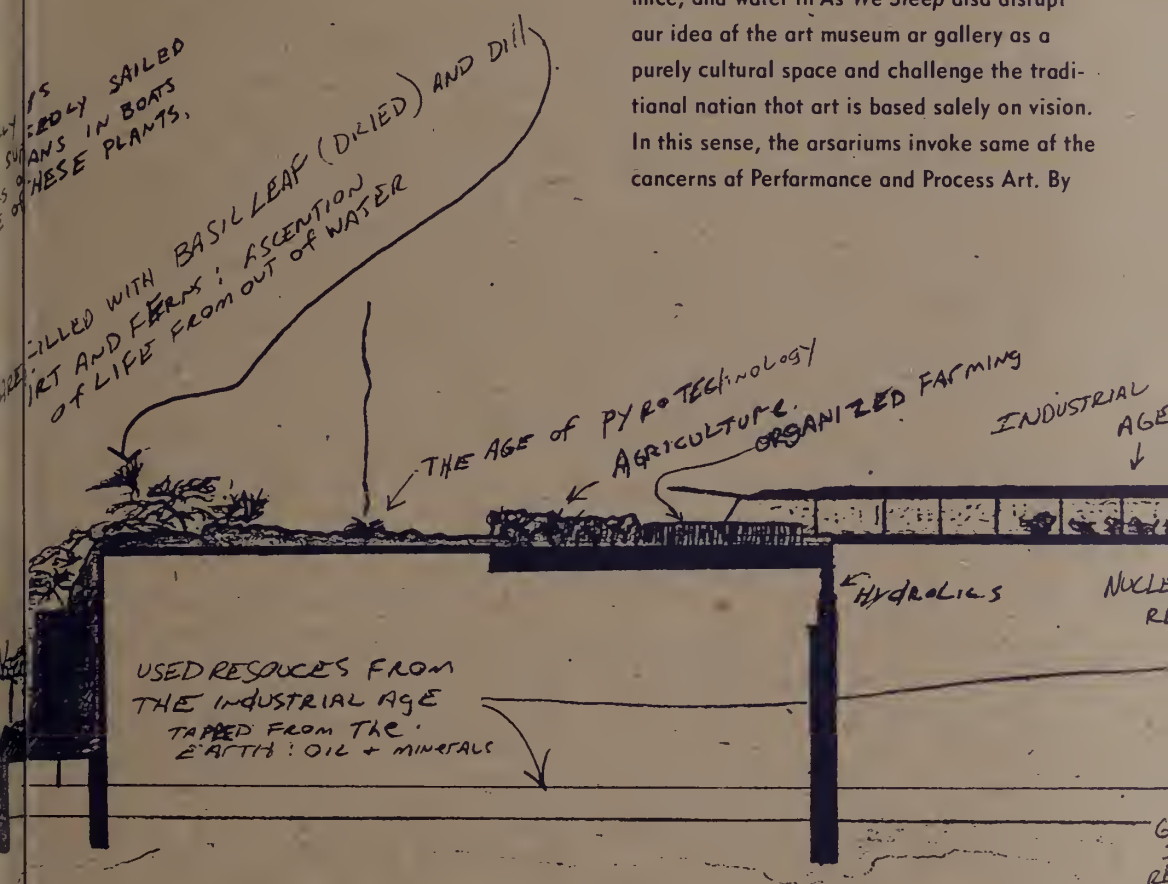


Michael Paha, drawing for *Timeline*, 1985

aquatic life to travel freely throughout the system. And mice run through an elaborate network of wire mesh tunnels that link the entire ecosystem. Through the lens of science, Paha brings into focus aspects of the natural world that usually remain invisible. In addition to the nocturnal life of animals, the continuous movement of water running through *As We Sleep* cuts a streambed in the split-level terrariums.

While the piece exposes a nocturnal ecosystem, it also creates a familiar tableau—a bedroom, a laboratory, a study. Positioned behind the wooden wall frame is a bed covered by a blanket. Situated between the terrariums is a bookshelf containing four volumes of *How Things Work*. A desk sits peripheral to the wall structure with a microscope placed on it. The bed (a place of dreaming) and the microscope (an emblem of scrutinizing vision) converge, elucidating our desire for mastery. Underneath the red lighting, things not seen in the world, such as the nocturnal life of animals and the memories of childhood, are thrown into relief. These intricacies invite the viewer into a world of fantasy—to play the explorer, the conqueror, the scientist. However, this childlike fantasy of omnipotence is subtly subverted, for this ecosystem is a self-contained world that insists upon following its own laws.

The sounds and movements of the finches, mice, and water in *As We Sleep* also disrupt our idea of the art museum or gallery as a purely cultural space and challenge the traditional notion that art is based solely on vision. In this sense, the arboriums invoke some of the concerns of Performance and Process Art. By

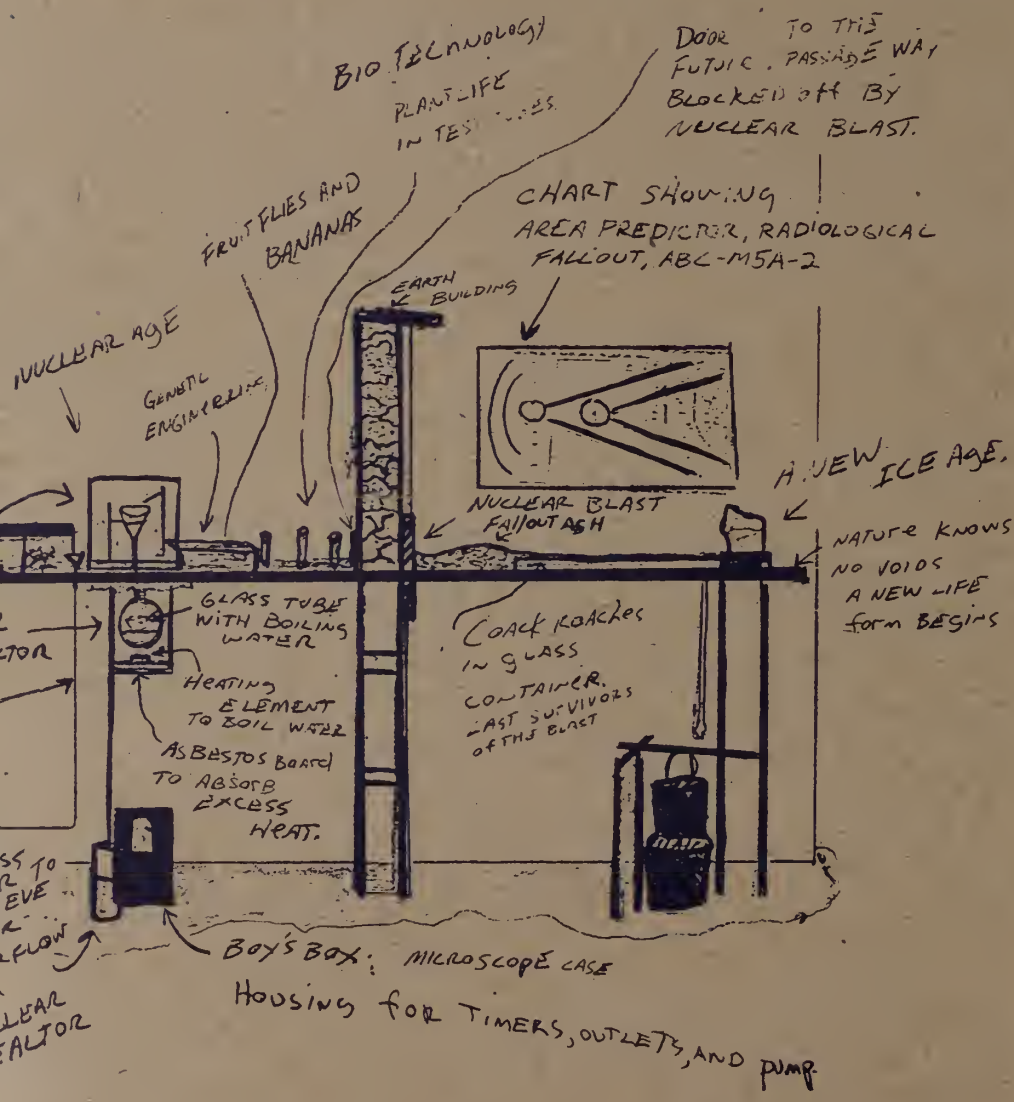


focusing on naturol processes, Paha asks us to rethink conventional ideos of time ond spoce.

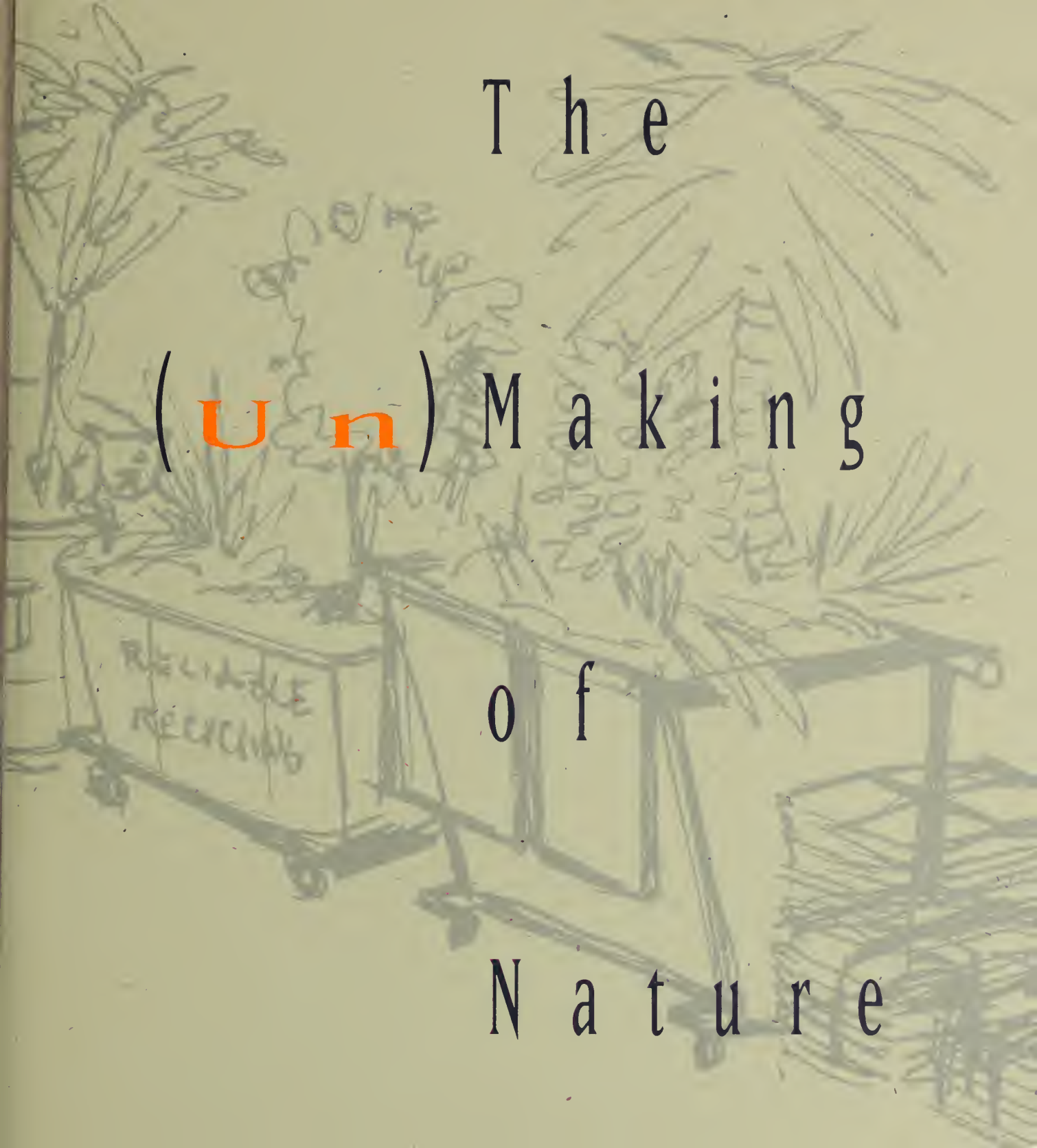
Poho's instollations ore port of o larger contemporory ort movement thot is re-exomining our relotionship to nature. Unlike the environmentol ort movement of the sixties ond seventies, contemporory ortists ore not concerned with socio-ecologicol problem solving. Rother, they seek to octivote our feors, fontosies, ond desires regarding technology, nature, ond environmentol endangerment.

"The (Un)Moking of Nature" explores various ways in which ortists ore engoged in this project, from the reopproisol of the genre of londscape pointing to the reinvestigotion of notural moteriols in sculpture ond the direct engagement of environmentol issues. Contemporary ortists ore oddressing the forces thot construct noture's imoge ond threaten its existence. By confronting many of these issues simultaneously, Paha's installations creote on environment thot facilitates o dialogue, which, in the foce of environmentol endongerment, is of increosing concern to oll of us.

James Marcovitz
Helen Molesworth



The (Un)Making of Nature



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Whitney Museum Independent Study Program:
Julia Einspruch, Elizabeth Finch, Jomes
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The exhibition at the Whitney Museum Downtown
will travel to the Whitney Museum of American Art,
Fairfield County, Stamford, Connecticut.
October 12, 1990–January 5, 1991

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Opposite: Mark Dion and William Schefferine,
drawing for *Under the Verdant Carpet:*
The Dreams of Mount Koch, 1990

Cover: detail

The (Un)Making of Nature

Julia Einspruch
Helen Molesworth

The reinvestigotion of noture in contemporary art signols a larger culturol shift in our ottitude toward nature at the close of the twentieth century. Indeed, we are constontly reminded of the environmentol crisis by staggering stotistics which indicate thot without drostic modificotions in the way we live, we moy very well see the end of nature. With the ropid depletion of the earth's resources ond the olmost unbridled advancement of technology, it is logicol to conclude that noture will soon be eclipsed by the vogue yet omnipotent force we hove creoted.

As noture's physicol presence continues to erode—as Brazilian rain forests are defolioted ond the Hudson River is polluted with industrial waste—noture has understandobly become this yeor's *cause célèbre*. Nonetheless, this environmentol concern goes beyond mere fashion; it indicates a desire to recover noture not only in our physical world but also in ourselves.

This exhibition ottempts to onswer two fundomentol questions: what is noture ond what is our relationship to it? The ortists' responses ore os complex os the problems ot hond, presenting o multiplicity of positions and approoches to imoging and imagining nature in the 1990s.

Many of the ortists feotured in this exhibition ore too young to hove participoted in the environmentol movement of the 1960s or the Earthworks projects of the 1970s. Yet their works reveol on ocute oworeness of the natural world, accompanied by o new set of relationships to the landscape and nature. Unlike the sense of grandeur and scole thot occomponied the Earthworks movement, much of this new art attempts to trop or confine noture in hermetic containers, treating parts of the earth in o precious or archivol monner symptomotic of the fear thot we ore losing or have already lost our toctile and sensory relationship to the lond. Other works investigate how our contemporary understanding of nature is o product of imoges, mony of which are generated by the medio. These works deconstruct such imoges while simultaneously trying to creote o "new" image thot incorporotes both our desires and our given reolity. Finolly, severol artists directly engage the environmentol crisis in their works. However, they differ from their predecessors in not formulating comprehensive solutions to the problems. These ortists instead try to use ort os o mobilizing force by bringing the politicol reolities of the globol eco-crisis into o museum setting.

In ossembling this group of works, the curotors hove formuloted diverse responses to the questions the ortists roise. The tradition of londscope pointing and its recent reemergence ore addressed, for example, through on effort to clarify technology's role in our perception of the sublime in noture. It becomes cleor, however, that mony ortists hove bypassed technology, approoching noture in o more personol woy, primorily through fontasy and fetishism. The ideo of o personol relotionship with noture also leods to o reloted issue: the desire to control nature. Finolly, ortists whose works explicitly engoge the environmentol crisis ore discussed in on essoy which odvocotes octivism, reinforcing the hope thot direct involvement will engender o new, more respectful association with noture.

The strotegies of both the ortwork ond the cotologue essoys effect what we have called "The (Un)Moking of Nature"—o deconstruction of the troditionol conceptions of noture ond o simultoneous construction of o more vioble relotionship to it. In this monner, we hope to creote on oreno in which these pressing issues can be investigated.

The Sublime Today:

Reconfigurations of the Landscape

Julia Einspruch
James Marcovitz

The emergence of Americon landscope pointing in the eorly nineteenth century marked Americon ort's coming of oge: ortists no longer sought to emulate Europeon precedents, but instead found what they considered to be o unique Americon aesthetic based on the New World's boundless vistos. Americon londscope painting, particularly the Hudson River School, nevertheless remained under the influence of the European notion of the sublime, as developed by Edmund Burke ond Immonuel Kant.

According to Kont, beouty creotes harmony by putting our foculties ot eose, while the sublime produces o state of agitation, ot once exolting ond threatening to our very being through the presentotion of awesome forms and infinite spaces. In its development by American painters, the sublime was transformed into what Borboro Novok hos termed o "pora-religion" of noture, God, ond mon: the londscope become o vehicle of tronscendentol experience.

Contemporory Americon ortists interested in landscope reject such experience as myth. For certoin artists in this exhibition, londscape is never unmedioted but olwoys enmeshed in codes of meaning. Indeed, several ortists, rather than deol directly with noture, use the imaging strategies ond technologies of mass media to investigote londscope os o culturol cotegory. In so doing, they suggest o contemporory reconfigurotion of the sublime, one creoted, os it were, through special effects.

With on ovid interest in spectoculor events in nature, Jack Goldstein evokes the more theotricol aspects of nineteenth-century londscape painting. *Untitled* (1985), a hyperrealistic image of cloud-covered volcanic mountains erupting into a deep blue sky, is in one sense not far removed from the dramotic subjects of Frederic Edwin Church. However, Goldstein's pointings ore composed from photographs and airbrushed to effect the rother lurid, deeply soturoted hues of the cinemotogrophic technicolor image. Goldstein in fact refers to these paintings os "movie-sets that showcase speciol effects os edited from o world narrative." No primory experience of noture is possible, for Goldstein presents a nature already constructed technologically as on image. The sublime here is evoked not through on experience of triumphant unity with noture but through on ombivolent encounter with the deodly seductions of technology.

If Goldstein "technologizes" the sublime, Lauro Emrick's and John Pfahl's treatments of the landscape conventionalize it. In *Stolen Horizon* (1990), Emrick frames o photogrophic imoge of o snow-covered mountain in o poir of cor windows. The very emblem of the sublime, on owesome chain of jagged mountain peaks, is here contained and conventionalized, since it is viewed through the cor windows. John Pfohl's photogrophs, shot from television progroms such as *Fantasy Islond* and the PBS series *Masterpiece Theater*, present yet another mediated relationship to nature. The

Jack Goldstein, *Untitled*, 1985

April Gornik, *One*, 1986

images look as if they belong to the tradition of fine art landscape photography, printed as they are in black and white on delicate platinum-palladium paper. However, these "video landscapes," as Pfahl calls them, cause the viewer to confront natural forms through the intermediary of a television screen. The sublime is thus reduced to the mundane experience of a television show.

With its endless expanse of seascape, April Gornik's painting *One* (1986) is a nostalgic evocation of the nineteenth-century landscape tradition. As in the works of Thomas Cole and Frederic Church, *One* simultaneously intimidates the viewer with its vast proportion and moody atmosphere and invites a closer examination of curious details. The water, with its gently undulating surface, remains mysteriously undisturbed by the foreboding sky above. Most striking, however, are the enigmatic patches of light which emanate from the horizon and are reflected on the water's surface through the cracks in the billowing clouds. This mystical light, which cannot be attributed to a single source, along with the title of the painting, allude to a kind of transcendence. But the melodramatic tension between calm and storm, light and dark, so

typical of the sublime landscape, is exaggerated to the point of sentimentality—as if to compensate for the modern incapacity to experience a transcendental union with nature.

Michael Cuddington is resigned to the disappearance of the pristine landscape untouched by technology. *Central Valley* (1989) is a diminutive rural view, meticulously painted along the bottom of a huge, arched piece of scrap plywood. This picturesque image of the American farm is overwhelmed by its support—the chief material of housing construction. The pastoral has been destroyed for the creation of tract housing, built out of the very material on which the miniature landscape is painted. Moreover, the rough, unfinished scrap of plywood also negates any sense of nature's force or magnitude, so that it is impossible to register the sublime.

Untitled #11 (1987), Clegg and Guttmann's large format, unmanipulated Cibachrome print, presents a dramatic landscape that is partially obstructed by the silhouettes of a hydroelectric pylon and electrical wires. The work suggests that nature and technology are inextricably intertwined and that it is senseless to set up a binary opposition between them. The sky, electric blue and scattered with clouds, and the pylon, its wires surging with energy, work in tandem to suggest an awesome combination of forces. Within this operatic integration of the landscape and technology, Clegg and Guttmann invent a new sublime.

Underlying all these artists' works is the realization that it is no longer possible to procure a pure or essential vision of the landscape. Although the artists articulate their positions in terms of the sublime, they rehearse this eighteenth-century concept from the experience of the late twentieth century.

Fantasy and Fetishism in Contemporary Representations of Nature

Elizabeth Finch

Nature and culture, traditionally understood as opposites, have never been clearly distinct. Indeed, it is through culture that we experience nature: the city park, the natural history museum, the wildlife preserve. For the environmentalist Bill McKibben, nature has become so culturally mediated that it is no longer self-contained: "We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature's independence *is* its meaning; without it there is nothing but us." McKibben's statement is indicative of one aspect of contemporary opinion that has accepted, if not celebrated, the loss of nature to culture. As a result, many contemporary artists have dismissed the use of nature both as reference and as material in their work.

Yet there are others who regard this dismissal as a loss. For them, merely rejecting nature as an aspect of the cultural overlooks its central role in human imagination and memory. These artists seek to recover the idea of a nature—as separate from culture—through a process of private identification. Fantasy and fetishism are two of the visual manifestations of this new approach. Fantasy, derived from the imagination, is the surfacing of conscious and unconscious desires, often after a period of repression. Fetishism is a highly personal act that establishes a substitute for an object or experience considered lost.

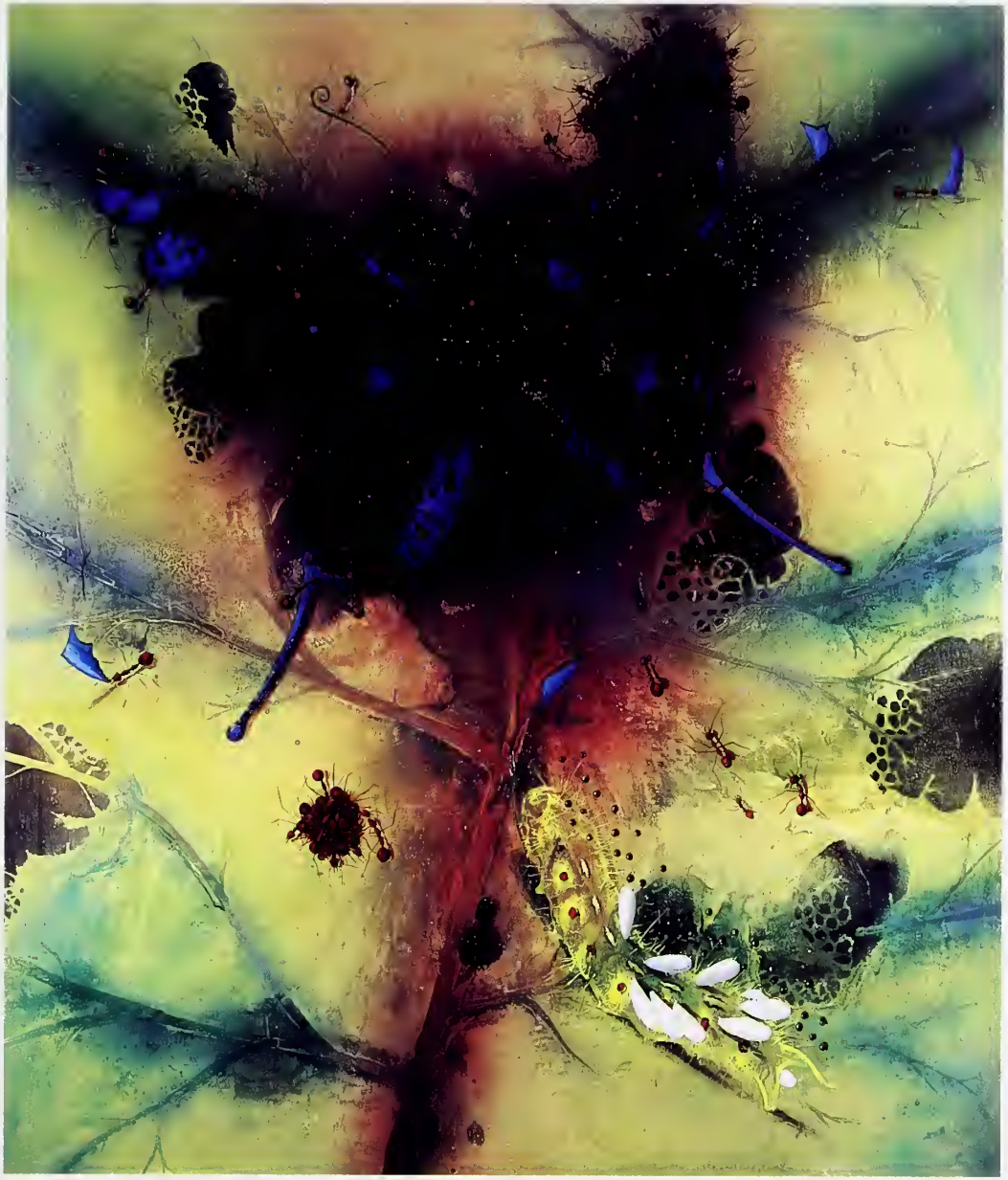
Once "lost," nature cannot return in any simple form; paradoxically, it may reappear in "unnatural," hybrid, even grotesque ways. In Alexis Rockman's painting *The Dynamics of Power* (1989), nature returns in horrific guise: a butterfly being consumed by a swarming army of ants. Greatly magnified, these two insects common to our experience of the natural world become perversely sensual, even surreal, in their violent confrontation. Rockman presents nature as a fantasy of inundation where the death of the butterfly becomes the cause for the teeming life of the ants. This event, rendered in detail, indicates a certain delight in the horror and disgust experienced in viewing one form of life overcoming another.

Both Petah Coyne and David Nyzio combine natural and synthetic materials to construct fantasies of nature as a site of mysterious or obscure forms and effects. In Coyne's untitled sculpture of 1989, organic shapes embrace an unspecified or unknown nature that dominates and dwarfs the viewer. Using a variety of materials, such as clay, wire, and black sand, Coyne creates bound and twisted shapes that slip in and out of established natural forms—tree roots, cocoons, pockets of debris. Suspended from the ceiling of the gallery, the precarious sculpture suggests organic forms about to be unleashed. This tension is then maintained as a permanent fantasy of an ominous natural threat. Coyne worked and reworked these composite shapes, demonstrating her personal investment in a fantastic nature capable of expanding beyond cultural boundaries.

Michelle Stuart, *Brookings Herbarium #41*, 1988–89

David Nyzia also uses natural materials to construct a fantasy of a spectacular materialization of nature. In *Farm* (1989), iridescent butterfly wings, meticulously cut into squares, are pinned to a framed panel, creating a plane of color reminiscent of Color Field painting. Unlike the automatous paintings it refers to, *Farm* shifts colors with the viewer's movement due to the iridescence of the butterfly wings. Normally considered benign, the butterflies take on an aspect of terror when used as a replacement for paint. The artist's act of cutting and placing the butterfly wings implicates him in the violence of the fantasy. And the viewer participates by walking around the work to cause the color shifts.

Other artists return to nature by creating forms which function as fetishes for that part of nature considered lost. Michelle Stuart's *Brookings Herbarium* series (1988–89) reflects a highly personal incorporation of natural materials. Dried plants are pressed into squares of encaustic, creating an effect which varies



Alexis Rockmon, *The Dynamics of Power*, 1989

fram the decaying ta the fassilized. Unlike Cayne's arganic and inarganic materials, Stuart's da nat daminate through their size. Instead, they emanate tremendaus presence thraugh their singularity. There is a tension here between the transience traditianally assaciated with the use of natural materials and the artist's persanal effort to fix and make permanent a relatian ta nature. By repeating the pracess af selecting and transfarming arganic elements within a series, Stuart cantinually re-creates the fetish in a new but related farm. The persanal meaning af the fetish is maintained, while the specific object changes. Thaugh Stuart accepts the existence af a culturally mediated nature, she does not suggest that it lessens ar devalues aur experience.

In the work af Brian D'Amata, the integratian af preserved natural materials inta an elabarate display represents anather effart ta recaver nature thraugh bath fantasy and fetishism. In D'Amata's *Tamb far Female and Male Butterfly* (1989), twa preserved butterflies are placed in a glass-fronted display case directly under lenses that distart their image. Within the case, the butterflies rest on a layer af pawdered pigment that carrespands ta the calors of their wings, establishing a temparal link between their status as natural artifacts and the awareness that they will eventually decampase. D'Amata's wark evakes a fantasy af nature as a scene af death and preservation. Rather than represent nature as a site af emerging farms, he is cancerned with nature's gradual dissolutian. Further, the selectian and display af the butterflies as natural artifacts suggests that they functian as fetishistic replacements for a nature feared to be lost. By recontextualizing techniques used to display preciaus abjects, D'Amata establishes the passibility of a private relatian ta nature through fetishism.

Althaugh all the artists discussed address an aspect af death in nature, their wark daes nat represent a memarial for the natural world. Rather, it reasserts the vital place that nature cantinues to hold in aur culture. With the present threat af enviranmental crisis, fantasy becames a way ta play aut renewed fears, while fetishism recanciles a persanal lass with the realizatian that nature can na langer be cansidered a baundless resource.

The Illusion of Control

Lydia Yee

In recent years there has been a heightened awareness of the environmental crisis that has permeated all levels of society, as demonstrated by such trends as the new fashionability of cloth diapers, the unfashionability of fur coats made from the pelts of endangered species, or the marketing of organically grown produce. Environmental concerns have entered popular culture and altered consumption patterns. People are learning to restrain individual desires in the greater interest of the environment. Control has become a way to protect and preserve nature and to deal with personal and industrial excesses. This new consciousness runs counter to the old understanding of nature as a savage force from which we first sought protection and then sought to conquer. Earlier attitudes toward nature thus betrayed a fear of its power and, subsequently, a fear of losing control.

Much of the work done by contemporary artists addressing the environment and our relationship to nature takes up the issue of control and a simultaneous loss of control—an approach that links up the old and persistent idea of nature as a potentially dangerous force with the new concerns for the endangered environment. In some of the works an extreme degree of control is present in the form of the containment of nature for archival purposes, which simultaneously preserves nature and neutralizes the potential threat it poses. There is a simultaneous loss of control, however, which results from the subordination to an extremely rigid containment or replacement of organic materials. The transformation of these materials into commodities or simulacra denies the heterogeneous character of the natural world. In the end, control becomes the absolute arbiter, infusing these sterile representations (or re-presentations) of natural objects with a disquieting ambience of death. Other works that display less rigorous degrees of control allow the restrained objects to become involved in a dynamic that transcends containment, thus relinquishing a measure of control. Such works recognize that control is often just an invention to help order and make sense of things and to mask our loss of control. Ultimately, attempts to control nature are often illusory, situated in the realm of the imaginary rather than in reality.

Vincent Shine's hyperreal plastic simulations of plant life function as discreet reminders of the homogenizing effect of contemporary culture. Shine fabricates reproductions of several plants, including papyrus and mulberry, in excruciating detail, from such synthetic compounds as neoprene and vinyl acetate. To the unsuspecting viewer these fragile plant forms seem to be specimens preserved for archival purposes. But as the viewer discovers their synthetic constitution, contradictory feelings arise in response to this encroaching plastic technology. Technology has enabled us to extend our control over nature and colonize its regions. Remaking the natural out of the synthetic is a means of maintaining invariability and of ensuring against deviation. Nature is, therefore, both contained and replaced. This overregulation, however, leads to a loss of control: plastic technologies eradicate the genetic diversity of distinct species,

Vincent Shine, *Untitled (Blue Stamen)*, 1989

o process thot echoes the technologicol leveling effect of o seamless plastic existence within culture. Notural artifacts are now composed of the some synthetic materiols thot ore repeatedly found throughout the realm of culture. Nature and culture ore both similarly subdued ond tronsformed by the pervosive presence of technology.

Ashley Bickerton's *Minimalism's Evil Orthodoxy Monoculture's Totalitarian Aesthetic #2* (1990) disploys rice, coffee, ond peonuts representing the monocultures of Asio, South Americo, ond Africo, olong with topsoil somples from each continent. The moterials ore encased in six pristine pillors of black onodized steel ond gloss ond restroined by cobles to o wall mount, which serve as high-tech bondage gear thot both subjugotes ond entombs noturol ossets. Bickerton here octs out o wish to fulfill on obsessive fantasy of control and domination of nature through contoinment ond repetition. Within the sterile confinement of the receptacles, differences between noturol moterials become superfluous, os each naturol element is rendered utterly impotent by its isolotion in identicol steel-ond-gloss units. Seoled in these slick, airtight "pockoges," the elements lose their volue os usoble goods, serving only os signs for commodities thot demonstrote power ond control through ownership. The visuol sterility of the pockoged monocultures suggests their incopocity to function as foodstuffs and emphosizes how "third world" resources ore transformed into "first world" commodities.

The works of Peter Hopkins deol with woste, the other side of consumption. In *Eight Stops on a Thirty Foot Section* (1989), Hopkins photographically documents the collection of gorboge from eight spots olong o thirty-foot stretch of freewoy. The gorboge is rolled up in o convos and stored in o bin (*Boxed Thirty Foot Pour*, 1989), disployed alongside the photogrophs of

Vincent Shine, *Untitled (Long-stem Seedling)*, 1989

the sites from which the garbage was taken. Hopkins makes reference to Robert Smithson's work of the late 1960s by using Smithson's "site/non-site" strategy of documenting and displacing materials from a specific natural site into a gallery environment. The allusion to Smithson functions as a historical point of reference that accentuates the urgency of current environmental problems: in both the "non-site" of the gallery and the real "site" in the external world, garbage now occupies the position that natural objects once held. Hopkins uses canvas, a sign denoting cultural development, to contain garbage samples that we in fact cannot contain. The refuse itself is not visible, but its contours can be made out underneath the rolled canvas. Hopkins plays off the same type of control that other works use vis-à-vis natural materials, but his reference is to the present state of disposable culture. The artist's canvas becomes just another scrap that fills our homogenized vista or our landfills. The unadulterated uniformity of our waste attests to the consistency of our experience of consumption.

Claire Pentecost's *Museum of Natural History* (1989–90) represents an oppositional relationship of humans to animals. Pentecost works with square panels mounted several inches away from the wall in a highly structured grid format of eight vertical rows of eight panels each. The front side of each square is coated with a glue derived from animal hide and stained with black and white pigment. Mounted to the back side of each square is a photograph of an animal, taken from the dioramas at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Repeated in each vertical row is the image of a different animal. The animal images are reflected in mirrors mounted on the wall behind each row of panels, and in order to see them the viewer must negotiate the correct angle. This transmutation of the natural into a dead image or a

Ashley Bickerton, *Minimalism's Evil Orthodoxy Monoculture's Totalitarian Aesthetic #2*, 1990

product disclases the nature of our relatianship ta animals, aur treatment of them as explaitable resaurces. The hierarchy becomes apparent through the dynamics af pawer inherent in the act of looking: the active human gaze structures a pasitian af daminance aver the object of the gaze. But this implicit contral is made prablematic by the need to negotiate the proper angle and by the fact that viewers' attempts at laaking are alsa reflected back in the mirrars.

The warks here, which oscillate between contral and lass af cantral, signal the crisis in our ability to understand and experience nature. In the wark af Shine and Bickerton such an exacting cantrol is exercised that nature is preserved as an artifact. The cantral af nature through this process of preservatian is symptamatic of the homogenization and consequent anesthetizing effect af a technalogical culture. Hapkins and Pentecast undo the unyielding structure of cantral by introducing elements of dynamic cantradictian. The disruption of control mirrors aur averuse and abuse of natural resources, a situation that cannat be cantained and that has glabal ecological ramificatians.

Information Value:

The Art of Environmental Activism

Helen Molesworth

Against the backdrap af an enviranmental crisis, cantemparary culture in general is experiencing a resurgence af attentiveness ta nature, which is increasingly evident in the media and in palitical attention to environmental issues. A new branch af philasophy, "land ethics," proposes that we are morally responsible for our treatment af the Earth. As the philasapher Alda Leapald has said, "The land ethic simply enlarges the baundary of the community to include sails, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land." Similarly, "Gaia," a scientific theary which develaped the cancept af "planet management," insists that all earth processes are inextricably linked in a cycle af cause and effect. In the wards af Richard Lavelack, the founder af Gaia, "the entire range af living matter on Earth, fram whales ta viruses, can be regarded as a single entity. . . ."

Several af the artists in this exhibitian—Mark Dian and William Schefferine, Patricia Tharnley, and Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds—situate their wark in this matrix af sacial concern and respansibility. Their wark breaks the hermeticism af art, and they resist the nihilism of the pastmadern cancept that reality is now only a media image. Instead, these artists didactically implicate the viewer in a larger cultural system, demanding active engagement bath in the artwark and in the environmental crisis in general.

This positian af activism is achieved largely thraugh the use af texts. A text requires a reader far completian; as the French literary theorist Roland Barthes has written, "a text's unity lies nat in its arigin but in its destination." Here the viewer/reader must assume an active positian, ane equivalent ta that af the artist. The incarparation of text consequently creates a dialogue between artist and viewer. Infarmative or poetic, text can communicate alternative farms of infarmatian.

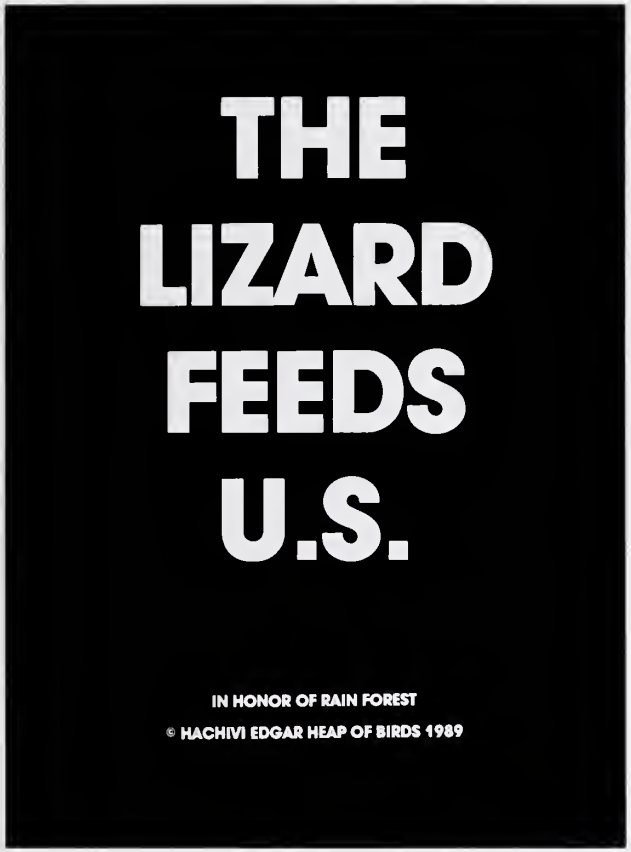
In Christy Rupp's *99.44% Forgatten* (1990), twa life-size elephant tusks fabricated entirely aut af plastic bottles are displayed as if in a natural history museum. A whitewash of paint over the tusks abscures mast af the text, leaving anly the Ivary Saap laga praminently visible. The sign "Ivary" emerges and recedes, familiar and unfamiliar, as if mirroring aur semicansciausness about the enviranmental crisis. Rupp implies that our desire far purity and cleanliness has been partly caused by the praliferatian af taxic cleaning substances in nanbiodegradable containers. She alsa links the hoarding of preciaus abjects ta the endangerment of a species, in this case, elephants slaughtered for their ivary tusks.

The destructive rale af the West in the global ecasystem is further explored in the wark of Hachivi Edgar Heap af Birds. Like Rupp, Heap af Birds actively negates the rarified art abject thraugh his chaice af materials. In *In Honor af Rain Farest* (1989), three black-and-white phatastats with three fragmentary texts are pinned ta the wall. Their urgent messages

Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds, *In Honor of Rain Forest*, 1989

proclaim the imperiled state of the tropical rain forest in sparse and stringent language that requires deciphering. This deciphering ultimately touches on the cause-and-effect relationship between our daily activities and the demise of the rain forest. For example, "Burning Debt Burning Burgers" and "Food for the Brick Prick" relate our budget deficit and our appetite for red meat to a pattern of overconsumption that has accelerated deforestation. In order to compete in "first world" markets, less industrialized countries like Brazil are forced to strip the forest to make export products and to convert the deforested land into more "profitable" ventures such as cattle ranching. "The Lizard Feeds U.S." alludes to the loss of species diversity as a by-product of this destruction. Both Rupp and Heap of Birds use a certain ambiguity to question one-sided or merely statistical types of information as well as to initiate an active dialogue with the viewer.

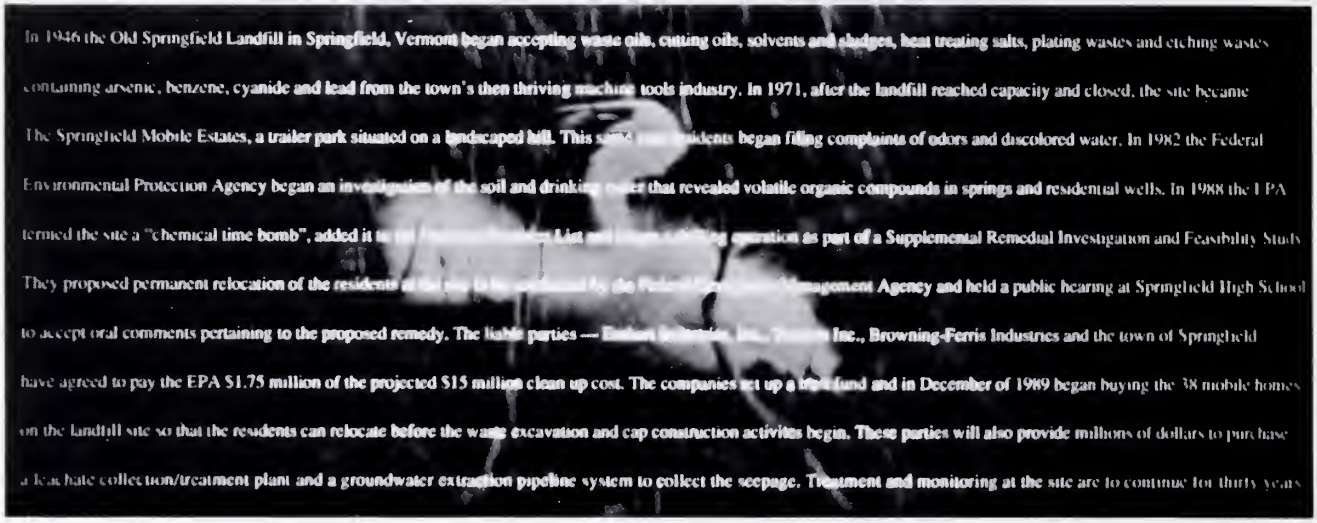
The photographs of Richard Misrach function differently. Firmly rooted in the tradition of documentary photography, his series *The Pit* (1987–89) records the governmental cover-up of the nuclear radiation responsible for the deaths of domestic farm animals near an atomic test site in Nevada (the "pit" is the site where government officials instructed farmers to dump the carcasses). Very little interpretation is required here.



The monumentol photographs of the deod cottle ond the stroightforword text about the cover-up, olthough informative, anesthetize the viewer. The event is already complete so that we are not given any raam for actian; overwhelmed by the horror of the event, we turn away from the work.

The effect of medio sensotionalism and dromotic photojournolism on the information we receive about the environment is critically examined in Patricia Thornley's instollotion. Her work sits in a darkened oreo of the gollery, dormant until activated by the push of a button, at which point it is transfarmed into a media spectacle. A slide show of text ond images accompanied by music is projected onto the surface of a white fiberglass lawn swan sitting in front of a woll constructed af split metal pipes. The text tells of o trailer park built on top of a landfill; the projected images are of flying geese. While the lown swon speoks of the dream of home ownership, the flying geese ollude to thase who inhabit mare transitional housing such as trailer parks. This element af class, perpetuolly overlooked by the media, is faregraunded in Thornley's work as a way to further complicate the issue of woste, for industriol and nuclear by-products are dumped every day into poor communities in the United States or exported to third world countries. After sixty seconds, this "medio moment" ceases and the work returns to a stote of "hibernotion." By using devices of duration and distroction, Thornley raises the question of access to information and the terms under which it is given ond received. One cannot obsarb all of the text in one reoding. The experience is thus timed, which places us in a position of power, since we can control the amount of information received; yet the orrongement also exposes how our access ta information is octuolly highly controlled.

The need for olternative types of information and informed dialogue underlies the site-specific installation *Under the Verdant Carpet: The Dreams of Mount Koch* (1990) by Mark Dian and William Schefferine. Contained within the familiar urban landscape of dumpsters, cor tires, and gorbage drums is a miniature tropical rain forest. The latter has come to signify ecalogical crisis, and its inclusion among elements of aur own familiar landscape reveals the way we tend ta displace environmentol problems onto foreign sites. This displocement distrocts us from creoting strategies to solve our own woste problems or understand how the two problems are intertwined.



Patricia Tharnley, *Untitled*, 1990

Mount Koch is the primary dumping site for New York City's waste, and it is projected that in the near future it will be the highest peak on the northeastern coast. The dream of Mount Koch covered by lush greenery is undoubtedly a utopian one, yet it has a realistic and even pragmatic side. The garbage containers are covered with quotations, graphs, photographs, and diagrams which provide information, sometimes contradictory, that indicates the complexity of the local, national, and global eco-crisis. Included in this barrage of information are suggestions for both personal and governmental regenerative recycling strategies. These multifarious sources and types of knowledge are meant to empower the viewer, providing both a plethora of information and a context for debate.

All these works lay the groundwork for environmental activism. But the dissemination of information is only a beginning. The works also give us an opportunity to question our relationship to, and the importance of, nature in our lives and in our perceptions of ourselves. The answers will enable us to restructure a society in accordance with environmental realities.

Works in the Exhibition

All dimensions are in inches;
height precedes width precedes depth.

Ashley Bickerton (b. 1959)

Minimalism's Evil Orthodoxy Manaculture's Totalitarian Aesthetic #2, 1990
Steel, concrete, glass, rubber, plastic, sail, rice, coffee, and peanuts, 96 × 156 × 12¼
Sonnabend Gallery, New York

Clegg (b. 1957) and **Guttmann** (b. 1957)

Untitled #11, 1987
Cibachrome print, 45 × 66
Collection of Samuel and Ronnie Heyman

Petah Coyne (b. 1953)

Untitled, 1989
Mixed media, 111 × 60 × 63
Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Michael Cuddington (b. 1953)

Central Valley, 1989
Oil on plywood, 38 × 152
Collection of the artist

Brian D'Amato (b. 1962)

Tomb for Female and Male Butterfly, 1989
Ultramarine powdered pigment, gold powder, butterfly specimens, and aluminum display case, 34 × 22 × 3
Collection of the artist

Mark Dion (b. 1961) and **William Schefferine** (b. 1959)

Under the Verdant Carpet: The Dreams of Maunt Koch, 1990
Mixed-media, site-specific installation, dimensions variable
American Fine Arts, Co., New York

Laura Emrick (b. 1960)

Stolen Horizon, 1990
Car windshield and side window with sun reflective screen, 17½ × 72 × 2 overall
Collection of the artist

Jack Goldstein (b. 1945)

Untitled, 1985
Acrylic on canvas, 84 × 84
Collection of B.Z. and Michael Schwartz

April Gornik (b. 1953)

One, 1986
Oil on linen, 72 × 98
Collection of the artist; courtesy Edward Tharp Gallery, New York

Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds (b. 1954)

In Honor of Rain Forest, 1989
Three photostats, 42 × 56 each
Collection of the artist

Peter Hopkins (b. 1955)

Boxed Thirty Foot Pour, from the CAPITAL PROJECT, 1989
Bleached, rolled, and glued canvas with objects, 9 × 98 × 7
American Fine Arts, Co., New York

Eight Steps on a Thirty Foot Section, from the CAPITAL PROJECT, 1989
Eight Cibachrome prints, 20 × 17¾ each
American Fine Arts, Co., New York

Richard Misrach (b. 1949)

Dead Animals #1, from the series *The Pit*, 1987–89
Ektacolor plus print, 20 × 24
Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, and fotoman, inc.

Dead Animals #279, from the series *The Pit*, 1987–89
Ektacolor plus print, 20 × 24
Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, and fotoman, inc.

David Nyzio (b. 1958)

Farm, 1989
Butterfly wings, honeycomb board, and glass, 86 × 50
Collection of Edward R. Downe, Jr.; courtesy Postmasters Gallery, New York

Claire Pentecost (b. 1958)

Museum of Natural History, 1989–90
Eight panels of wood, hide glue with pigment, photographs, plexiglass, and mirrors, 72 × 8 × 4 each
Collection of the artist

John Pfahl (b. 1939)

PFV-2-A/Fantasy Island/ABC-TV, 1981
Platinum-palladium print and text, 14 × 11
Janet Borden, Inc., New York

PFV-3-A/Masterpiece Theater: Sunset Song/PBS-TV, 1981
Platinum-polladium print ond text, 14 × 11
Janet Barden, Inc., New Yark

PFV-7-A/Masterpiece Theater: Therese Raquin/PBS-TV, 1981
Platinum-palladium print and text, 14 × 11
Janet Borden, Inc., New York

Alexis Rockman (b. 1962)

The Dynomics of Power, 1989
Oil on canvas, 80 × 68
Collection of Arthur and Carol Goldberg

Christy Rupp (b. 1949)

99.44% Forgotten, 1990
Two pieces of welded steel ond plastic bottles, 95 × 38 × 14 each
P.P.O.W., New York

Vincent Shine (b. 1962)

Untitled (Blue Stomen), 1989
Neoprene, ethylene vinyl acetate, acetate, steel, epoxy, plexiglass, acrylic paint, acrylic pigment, and cyanacrylate esther, 7 × 4 × 3
Private collection; courtesy Thea Westreich Assaciates, New York

Untitled (Long-stem Seedling), 1989
Neoprene, ethylene vinyl acetate, acetate, steel, acrylic paint, plexiglass, and cyonocrylate ester, 12 × 3¼ × 3½
Collection of Eileen and Michael Cohen

Untitled (Mulberry Branch), 1989
Neoprene, ethylene vinyl acetate, steel, acrylic paint, plexiglass, and cyonocrylote ester, 2 × 4 × 3
Wolff Gallery, New York

Untitled (Papyrus #2), 1989
Neoprene, ethylene vinyl ocetote, acetate, steel, ocrylic point, plexigloss, ond cyanacrylate ester, 14½ × 5 × 4
Collection of Mr. ond Mrs. Edward W. Rose, III

Untitled (Small Seedling), 1989
Neoprene, ethylene vinyl acetate, steel, acrylic paint, plexiglass, polyolefin, and synthetic ocrylic polymer, 8 × 4 × 5¼
Collection of Knight Landesman; courtesy Robbin Lockett Gallery, Chicago

Michelle Stuart (b. 1940)

Brookings Herbarium #18, 1988–89
Encoustic, pigment, and plonts, 12 × 12
Fawbush Gallery, New York

Brookings Herbarium #33, 1988–89
Encoustic, pigment, and plonts, 12 × 12
Fawbush Gollery, New York

Brookings Herbarium, #37, 1988–89
Encaustic, pigment, ond plants, 12 × 12
Fawbush Gallery, New York

Brookings Herborium #41, 1988–89
Encaustic, pigment, and plonts, 12 × 12
Fawbush Gallery, New York

Brookings Herborium #45, 1988–89
Encaustic, pigment, ond plonts, 12 × 12
Fawbush Gallery, New York

Brookings Herbarium #75, 1988–89
Encaustic, pigment, and plants, 12 × 12
Fawbush Gallery, New York

Brookings Herbarium #89, 1988–89
Encaustic, pigment, and plants, 12 × 12
Fawbush Gallery, New York

Brookings Herbarium #94, 1988–89
Encoustic, pigment, and plants, 12 × 12
Fawbush Gallery, New York

Brockings Herbarium #99, 1988–89
Encaustic, pigment, and plants, 12 × 12
Fawbush Gallery, New York

Patricia Thornley (b. 1961)

Untitled, 1990
Multimedio installation, 70 × 168 × 48
Audio by the ortist and A. Leroy
Collection of the artist

Phatagraph Credits
Ken Schles (Galdstein, Rockmon)
Michael Tropea (Bickertan)

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